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DIVERSITY IN ACTION

Trialogue: A Three-Way Conversation of Faith

By John Switzer

Zaccheus climbed a sycamore tree to “see” who Jesus was. Muslims, Jews, and Christians engaged in Trialogue, fortunately, have the benefit of tables. Interfaith understanding is at the heart of what it means to be Catholic and Jesuit. It also made an early appearance at Spring Hill College.

In February of 1830, Bishop Michael Portier purchased 380 acres from the City of Mobile in the part of town providing the college its name. Although the college would be “eminently Catholic,” Portier guaranteed no influence exerted upon “the minds of the pupils for a change of religious principles.” One hundred thirty-five years later, the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Nostra Aetate*, the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. Sharing Portier’s convictions, the bishops called on Catholics “to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions” while acknowledging, preserving, and encouraging “the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.”

In 1995 the Society of Jesus proclaimed that being religious today means to be interreligious: “A positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism.” The goal of positive relationships established on friendly conversation is the very foundation of Spring Hill Trialogue: an opportunity for adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths to meet quarterly for face-to-face interreligious conversation. Volunteers bring food that is halal and kosher (even this is a learning experience). Coffee and tea are sipped. Questions are posed and answered by believers, not experts.



Trialogue participants, from bottom left (clockwise): Rev. Ellen Sims (United Church of Christ), Mr. Sedat Kacar (Muslim), Mrs. Perilla Wilson (Catholic), Dr. John Switzer (Catholic, Spring Hill College); Rabbi Steve Silberman (Jewish).

Photo © Elise Poché

Wrinkled brows emerge and smiles erupt. Interreligious friendships are born amid quotations from the Holy Qur’an and from both testaments of the Holy Bible. I can’t help but imagine that Bishop Portier would be pleased.

Composed of local believers from Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, our advisory board has insisted that the bulk of every event’s activity be centered on table conversation as believers speak from their hearts. A topic is usually chosen by the advisors and while speakers are occasionally used, they are not the center of activity. The emphasis remains on the participants seated at tables of eight or ten, with each of the three faiths represented. The advisory committee provides a list of discussion questions regarding the evening’s theme, but participants are free to take their conversation in any

direction they desire—as long as discussion is respectful.

How does one initiate a sustained experience of interreligious conversation? Just do it. Survey your community. Visit religious communities and build friendships. When trust is established, religious believers can’t help but express their convictions.

Religious self-identity has long been predicated on the idea that it grows best in an environment of self-imposed isolation. Inspired by Bishop Portier, Vatican II, and the Society of Jesus, we should recognize that interreligious literacy can be a catalyst toward clearer religious identity.

John Switzer is an associate professor of theology at Spring Hill College, where he also serves as director of graduate programs in theology and ministry.